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James Burkman
Indiana University

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Strategic Ambiguity: A Barrier On The Road To Knowledge Creation

James R. Burkman, Kelley School of Business, Indiana University, jburkman@indiana.edu

Abstract

The current view of knowledge, the constructivist view, holds a subjective perspective of knowledge that relies heavily upon the context within which knowledge is presented and interpreted. The use of strategic ambiguity in communication purposefully removes many of these contextual cues. This paper offers a brief overview of both knowledge creation and strategic ambiguity, and posits some preliminary research questions regarding the possible negative effects of strategic ambiguity on knowledge creation.

What is Knowledge?

Two prevailing concepts of knowledge exist today, largely differentiated by a cultural demarcation between Western and Eastern philosophies. As noted by Ponelis & Fairer-Wessels (1997), the Western view of knowledge sees knowledge as “declarative and procedural”, resulting from “hard data, codified procedures and universal principals”. Western knowledge is “explicit, expressed in numbers and words and easily communicated.” (Ponelis & Fairer-Wessels 1997) From this philosophical view, knowledge is seen through a very objective lens, and knowledge is considered to be universal. This concept of knowledge is known as the cognivist perspective.

The Eastern concept of knowledge, as popularized by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), sees knowledge as tacit, residing in the individual’s experiences, beliefs and perceptions. This form of knowledge relies on context, where knowledge is “drawn into the receiver’s context and experience” and interpreted within that framework (Ponelis & Fairer-Wessels 1997). This “constructivist perspective” holds that knowledge is not universal, but rather highly personal, difficult to express and therefore difficult to share with others (Ponelis & Fairer-Wessels 1997). The key to knowledge creation from the constructivist perspective is the sharing of tacit knowledge that is then converted into explicit knowledge. This process begins with a need for the “individuals being able to share their personal true beliefs about a situation with other team members.” (Ponelis & Fairer-Wessels 1997)

The sharing of knowledge can be viewed as either knowledge creation or knowledge transfer, depending on the perspective taken. At the individual

level, knowledge is being transferred from the source to the receiver. At the organizational level, knowledge is being created as each individual absorbs tacit knowledge from others, places it within a unique subjective perspective, and expresses it as explicit knowledge. These transactions can take place through many different media, including speech, experimentation, computer-mediated communication, and shared experiences.

The current efforts of knowledge management are grounded largely in the constructivist perspective. Companies seek to capture tacit knowledge, which is then converted to explicit knowledge, in order to gain competitive advantage. Before knowledge can be used, or managed, it must first be created. While many studies have looked at the problems associated with the knowledge creation, one important area of communication has not been fully addressed: strategic ambiguity.

What is Strategic Ambiguity?

Strategic ambiguity, as conceptualized by Eisenberg (1984), is communication where “individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals.” The message itself is not ambiguous: the “what is being said” is clear, but the context of the message is unclear. As discussed by Eisenberg (1984), clarity (the opposite of ambiguity) is “a relational variable, which arises through a combination of source, message, and receiver factors.” An individual who is the source of a message will take into account the possible perceived interpretive contexts used by the receiver and will, *if seeking clarity*, attempt to “narrow the possible interpretations of a message and succeed in achieving a correspondence between his or her intentions and the interpretation of the receiver.” Eisenberg (1984) However, it may be preferable to purposefully omit contextual cues and to allow for multiple interpretations on the part of the receiver (Eisenberg 1984).

Strategic ambiguity is “a direct outgrowth of the relativist view of meaning” (Eisenberg 1984), finding roots in the same philosophical foundations as the constructivist view of knowledge. The relativist view is summarized by Ortony (1979) who states that “Knowledge of reality, whether it is occasioned by perception, language, memory, or anything else, is a result of going beyond the information given. It arises through

the interaction of that information with the context in which it is presented, and with the knower's pre-existing knowledge." In this view, like that of the constructivist view of knowledge, context is the key factor in determining meaning.

Strategic Ambiguity and the Organization

Strategic ambiguity is used within an organization for a variety of reasons. Eisenberg (1984) argues that the use of strategic ambiguity by management can promote "unified diversity" within an organization because it allows individuals to "maintain individual interpretations while at the same time believing that they are in agreement." As an example, "university faculty on any campus may take as their rallying point "academic freedom", while at the same time maintaining markedly different interpretations of the concept." (Eisenberg 1984) This form of strategic ambiguity is commonly found in organizational missions, goals and plans, and is used by organizational leaders to "encourage creativity and guard against the acceptance of one standard way of viewing organizational reality." (Eisenberg 1984) More importantly for knowledge creation, individuals use strategic ambiguity in groups and in interpersonal communication.

Eisenberg (1984) points out that the individual members of a group "appeal to a repertoire of increasingly ambiguous legitimations which both retain the appearance of unity and reasonably represent the opinions of the group." In interpersonal communication, strategic ambiguity allows for the receiver to "fill in" what they believe to be the appropriate context and meaning. This process, known as projection, results in greater perceived similarity between the source and the receiver (Eisenberg 1984). Perceived similarity then leads to increased attraction and facilitates relational development (Clore & Byrne, 1974).

Individuals in an organization may use strategic ambiguity in lieu of lying, secrecy or hurtful candor in order to be more tactful, to avoid conflict, and to reach an understanding without harming the relationship (Eisenberg 1984). The use of strategic ambiguity may be even more prevalent among the "experts" in a given area. Eisenberg points out that "for those who are highly credible, clarity is always risky, since it provides the receiver with new information, which can result in a potentially negative reevaluation of character." (Eisenberg 1984)

Note that strategic ambiguity is not necessarily unethical communication. In a study done by Paul & Strbiak (1997), they found that "intrapersonal ethical analysis does not differentiate between strategic ambiguity and other communicative strategies. Both

ethical and unethical communicators use strategic ambiguity. Strategic ambiguity itself does not minimize the importance of ethics." Therefore, it seems unlikely that the use of strategic ambiguity is restricted only to organizations or individuals of questionable moral standing. In combination with the other examples given it seems most likely that the use of strategic ambiguity is widespread in organizations.

Is Strategic Ambiguity a Barrier?

From the basic definition of knowledge it is evident that context is critical for the receiver. By lessening the amount of contextual cues given, the receiver may be misled or be unable to understand the knowledge presented (Ponelis & Fairer-Wessels 1997). The research question offered here is fundamental to understanding the impact of strategic ambiguity in knowledge creation:

R1 – Will the use of strategic ambiguity, by the source, reduce the effectiveness of the receiver in understanding and applying the knowledge provided?

The use of knowledge in an organization may also be conceived of as a "flow" between the source of knowledge and the seeker of knowledge (Holtshouse 1988). The seeker may know the question, but may not know where to find the answer. The accessibility of answers depends in part on the ability of the source to "second guess" the questions that may be asked. This is done by providing many clear contextual cues, as discussed earlier. When strategic ambiguity is used, thereby limiting the contextual cues, accessing the information may become difficult. This could have a significant impact on the retrieval of knowledge residing in digital documents, as well as problems with identifying additional sources relating to the knowledge.

R2 – Will the use of strategic ambiguity, by the source, introduce ambiguity as to the location of the knowledge?

Also discussed earlier, the currently accepted view of knowledge - the constructivist view - is rooted in a subjective philosophy that is relatively new to Western organizations. Nonaka and Konno (1998) recently introduced the Japanese concept of "Ba" as a fundamental concept in the constructivist view of knowledge creation. Ba is defined as "a shared space for emerging relationships" that may be physical, virtual, mental, or any combination thereof (Nonaka and Konno 1998). Ba transcends ordinary human interaction by providing "a platform for advancing individual and/or collective knowledge". (Nonaka and Konno 1998) The fundamental type of ba identified by the authors is that of "originating

ba”, which is “the world where individual share feelings, emotions, experiences, and mental models.” They continue by noting that in originating ba “an individual sympathizes or further empathizes with others, removing the barrier between self and others.”

This “primary ba” is given as the point at which the knowledge creation process begins. However, in the presence of strategic ambiguity, it is unlikely that the receiver is “removing the barrier between self and others.” The extraordinary, by Western standards, dissolution of self into the larger whole may represent a fundamental cultural difference that may limit constructivist knowledge creation in the Western organization. At a minimum, we should consider the extent to which the use of strategic ambiguity differs between cultures.

R3 – Is the use of strategic ambiguity more prevalent in organizations comprised of an individualistic culture than in organizations comprised of a collectivist culture?

Conclusion

Strategic ambiguity probably exists in most every organization, particularly in Western organizations. This form of communication purposely reduces the contextual cues that are critical to the creation and discovery of knowledge. A need exists for research into this area to determine the extent by which strategic ambiguity affects knowledge creation and discovery, both by looking at the *content* of the knowledge created in this circumstance as well as the *availability* of the knowledge. Additionally, the prevalence of strategic ambiguity in different cultures should be examined. Despite the advantages of the constructivist view of knowledge, and knowledge creation, fundamental differences in communication may significantly reduce the ability of Western firms to use this subjective model.

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